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**Why This Isn't about Me: A Somewhat Responsible Response to an
Unsolicited Academic Response and the "Academic Response Phenomenon"**

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Many phenomena within popular culture can be directly attributed to academia, and academic culture. One such recent phenomenon which, I believe, begs our consideration, is the "academic response phenomenon." It's not new to suggest that educated people often have a need to get in the last word on a subject, but it seems that it has become ever more commonplace for academic periodicals to get in on this academic response phenomenon, by publishing more and more "response" articles. Whether or not we cared enough about the original subject in the article to actually devote one or more "responses" in future issues is a worthy consideration for another time and place; my focus remains upon the apparent growing need to get the last word in...in writing.

An author writes an article, then a colleague from within the discipline but across the country writes a response, and then the original author responds to the response and so on until either one party dies or loses interest or moves on to another subject entirely. The responses vary in terms of how much they actually "respond" to what has been written and how much they set forth new views not always fully related to what they were allegedly "responding to." Sometimes responses are sought, but more often it seems, responses are the result of someone's personal or professional feelings having been hurt, and/or their personhood or basic intelligence having been questioned.

Anyway, most "academic periodicals" today are frequent users of "responses" to articles they've previously published. That old adage "your comment does not dignify a response" has been replaced by a newer version: "you said what...I am compelled to respond." Recently, my own name was used fairly

prominently in a “response” to an issue that I had originally raised in an article of my own. As, I am sure with many “victims” of response articles: the person responding to my article missed (entirely in my view) the point of my original article. Given that the article was originally published, I remain hopeful that the editors of the periodical in which it was published actually got it, but the fact that they published a response which clearly didn’t get it, makes me suppose that they didn’t actually originally get it either. Which then begs the question: “if you publish a response that doesn’t really respond to an original article, did you actually understand or even READ the original article?” I used to ponder whether I should thank a person after they had written a particularly nice thank you note for something I had done for them. Eventually, I came to the realization that if I thanked a person for a thank you note, our mutual thanks could go on forever. At some point, we needed to move on, regardless of our love and admiration for each other. The same principle can be applied to responses to articles in academic journals: that this could simply go on forever. I write, you respond, I respond to your response, you re-respond, and so on and so on and on forever. So, rather than writing a response to an article, this article actually considers the need for us to individually and collectively respond at all. Why can’t we simply leave well enough alone? If I knew the answer to that, I’d not be writing this. But since I don’t, here goes: my original article concerned the tension and ongoing disputes between the perceived value of those who possess “only” the J.D. degree, rather than the more prestigious Ph.D. degree as they teach in criminal justice programs. The reason I put “only” in quotation marks, is because for those of us who’ve attended law school, the only time “only” is appropriate is when a law student’s education is at issue, is when that student needs “only” one drink to cap off a particularly grueling week of classes.

I suggested in my article that the debate over “only a law degree” wasn’t a particularly worthy one as it showed a bit of insecurity on the part of those with “only” Ph.D.’s and fostered a divide that should be narrowed rather than widened. Unfortunately, the response to my article that appeared in a subsequent issue of a “sister” publication, seemed to be inclined to “comfort” me for my own feelings of

inadequacy. My own inadequacies, however real, and notwithstanding, the reason I felt initially qualified to enter the debate and write the original article was because I possessed both the J.D. and the Ph.D. degree, and felt that such a position might uniquely qualify me to comment on the nature of the rift. Who could better understand the insecurities and the growing rift between the individual holders of two different and distinctive degrees, than a person who held both degrees? It seemed logical to me at the time.

As of now the issue of “JDs versus PhDs within the discipline” has become fodder for discussion in the pages of criminal justice periodicals and newsletters, among other places and I fear, the issue is already on the verge of becoming tired. I wrote back in 1997 in the January/February issue of ACJS Today, that I did not favor ACJS standards and my reasons for those views do not differ today. I believe that our “defensiveness” and insecurities as a discipline were very present back then and the “JDs versus PhDs debate” of today ably illustrates that our defensiveness and insecurities are every bit as present today, even though we have made significant strides in our status as a “real” discipline on dozens of campuses across North America. My original plan in “responding” to the article that mentioned my name was born out of my own defensiveness and insecurity: My respondent wrote: “that Engvall felt demeaned during the discussions at the Baltimore meeting is unfortunate.” Since that sentence clearly seems to put the onus on me, I would have written that actually I didn’t feel demeaned (I actually hold both the J.D. and Ph.D. degrees), but that I could certainly understand how many “J.D.s alone” would have felt demeaned. Perhaps Dr. Hunter didn’t realize that I held both degrees, but the fact that I hold them (whether deserved or not), clearly changes the tenor of what I was writing and I had hoped lent more credibility to my support for those holding “only” the J.D. degree. My argument, you see, wasn’t about *me*, nobody should care whether Engvall feels *demeaned*, I don’t even care about that; my point was that the very conversation and the way in which the session was conducted was very demeaning. My exact words in that article from ACJS Today’s February 2007 issue were: “how many people in that

room felt personally and professionally insulted...and how many felt personally and professionally dismissed?" The article wasn't about *me*, it was about my perceptions of how a significant portion of the audience must surely have felt. A much larger and more important issue I believe. It remains important that we conduct this debate in a manner which doesn't demean those "J.D.s alone" who are such an important cog in the teaching roles that many of our departments provide. I sometimes fear that we personalize this and other debates so much, that we lose sight of the points of those trying to make valid points. To that end, my simple point in writing this is this: I don't feel personally demeaned and I wouldn't expect the readers to care if I did...what I am concerned about is the demeaning nature of some (certainly not all) who carry this debate. Whether "J.D.s alone" belong in our discipline long term and the nature of what a J.D. degree versus a Ph.D. degree brings to a department are valid questions and not easy ones to answer. My only point is this: we are talking about people who are "in the room" and we should do so courteously and with reason and respect, otherwise, it's not those with "lesser" degrees who are being demeaned, but rather it is us.

I wrote this "response" shortly after the article to which I was responding came out. It was summarily rejected. It may have been rejected due to its obvious lack of quality, or...its general irony may have been fully lost upon the reviewer(s). It also may re-affirm our discipline's reputation as a rather humorless one. Petruso (2006) wrote in his study entitled "Deconstructing Faculty Doors" in which he examined the content on faculty office doors as a window into their souls: that professors in criminology and criminal justice are "almost entirely lacking in humor and fire in the belly" (p. 40).

How one interprets another's writing is, of course, a factor in whether a given proposal ever sees the light of day, just as it is a factor in an student who writes a paper for a professor being lauded as "brilliant and insightful" or rejected as "too far out there." One person's cutting edge is another person's off the edge.

Therein lies the problem with peer reviewed literature ever seeing the light of day: “what if the first two (which turn out to be the only two) reviewers simply don’t like your work...or “get” your work?” It means that you get your rejection, and likely your work never gets read by anyone else. Does everybody like every book they’ve ever read? Even classics of literature have their detractors...what if those detractors had been the only reviewers? Would *Moby Dick* have existed in Melville’s attic? Would *The Catcher in the Rye* have been published if the reviewers had been offended by the language used? The point is not to compare the drivel I write with the literature composed by Melville or Salinger, but the point is simply that who reviews your work is critical in whether or not your work ever sees the light of day. So, who is it that reviews your work? Do they know more than you about the topic? Do they write better than you? Who are they? Are they friends or colleagues of the editors? Have they been required to have completed some sort of “reviewer training?” Being a reviewer myself, I know the answer to all of these questions, and the answers, my friends, are not only blowing in the wind, they are random. Some reviewers are incredibly qualified...some...not so much. Some reviewers are petty, vindictive, and hate almost everything they read (unless they themselves or others they care about have done the writing).

As usual, with my ideas, I’m not really the first to espouse them, and the idea that the peer review process is severely flawed has arisen before. Fuller, (2000) and Hirschauer (2004) perhaps make this argument most clearly. Mustaine & Tewksbury (2008) cite those scholars and suggest that “for some, the peer review process is so flawed, politically influenced and poorly organized/managed, that it is viewed as hindering rather than helping the dissemination of good science” (p. 352). It’s unlikely that I’d suggest that an article of mine was “good science,” but I would be among those who might suggest that the peer review process is so flawed that it brings into question the very nature of peer review and that brings into question the quality of what we all get to read, and should make us wonder, perhaps even aloud, about what it is that we are not reading.

Fuller, S. (2000). The Governance of Science: Ideology and the future of the open society. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Hirschauer, S. (2004). Peer Review research reviewed: Sociological shortcomings of academic evaluation. Zeitschrift fur Soziologie, 33(1): 62-83.

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